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We pay a steep price for our free, open society

Freedom and the blessings of an open society are not free for the taking. They are dearly bought and the payments never end. In this dismal summer of 1987 we are paying the price and it is a troubling sight.

As the Iran-contra hearings drone on day after day in Washington, the inner workings of our secret national security apparatus are being laid bare and the agencies charged with our defense are given the role of villains in a national morality play.

The convening of public congressional hearings is proper and right. Members of the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency obviously defied the wishes of Congress and engaged in acts that are probably illegal and certainly unacceptable.

It was necessary to call them to account. It is equally necessary, however, that we confine our disapproval to those individuals who violated the rules, that we not allow their aberration to destroy confidence in the NSC and CIA.



The intelligence gathering activities of those agencies remain our first line of defense in a dangerous world and we weaken their capabilities at our own peril.

The same sort of agonizing self-examination is now underway in Israel, where political leaders are calling for a thorough inquiry into the investigative procedures of the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security service.

Those demands come after revelations that Shin Bet agents falsified evidence and used illegal means to force an Israeli army officer to confess to crimes he did not commit. The Israeli Supreme Court overturned the officer's conviction.

Israel walks a dangerous tightrope. Since its birth in 1948, it has been a nation under siege, remarkably maintaining citizens' rights in an open society while keeping constant vigilance against terrorism and the threat of invasion. Shin Bet has been the prime provider of intelligence in the war against the terrorists.

But, because Israel does have an open society where individual rights are jealously guarded, Shin Bet will be held responsible for its excesses.

In the United States and in Israel it is unthinkable that any other course should be followed. In both countries the rule of law requires that those in power act with the consent of the governed. In practice, that means that even matters of national security are often subjected to open debate.

That is, at once, our strength and our weakness.

Make no mistake; there will not be — now or ever — the same kind of public soul-searching among our adversaries. The Politburo of the Soviet Union sought no expression of the popular will before it invaded Afghanistan. It is impossible to even try to imagine the director of the KGB undergoing a public grilling on Moscow television.

Gorbachev, Castro, Ortega, Arafat, Assad — all operate by their own rules, unhampered by concern for individual rights or popular will. Their spies, their security agencies, their terrorists don't worry about public approval.

And it is they — not the CIA or the NSC or Shin Bet — who are the real villains. In our zeal to expose the excesses of our own agencies we had better not forget that.